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The Sacrifice of Serpents

Exchange and Non-Exchange in the Sarpabali of Indrāyanī, Kathmandu¹

Bert VAN DEN HOEK and Balgopal SHRESTHA

I. Introduction: the serpents (*nāga, sarpa*)

The mythology and iconography of Kathmandu Valley abound in snake-like beings. The cult of the *nāgas*, which was already flourishing at the time of the Buddha's sermons, probably represents one of the most conservative features of worship all over South Asia (Winternitz 1885, Vogel 1926, Fussman 1977).

Nāgas have traditionally been endowed with the capacity to change form, enabling them to assume human or serpent shape alternately. Apart from the word *nāga* (which is not yet current in Vedic texts), several other terms and euphemisms have been employed to designate this kind of being, none of them fully discriminating between the human, half-human, or snake (cobra)-like appearance. Although the word *sarpa* mostly conveys the meaning of its cognate, serpent, it appears from Vedic texts that *sarpa* may assume a human form too, most notably in the so-called *sarpasattra*, the sacrificial session conducted by the serpents themselves. According to the (black yajurvedic) Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra, the serpents in human form (*puruṣarūpa*) perform a *sarpasattra* "desirous of obtaining poison".²

Only the most accomplished (*siddha*) of human beings are, in Nepalese³ tradition, able to make the reverse transformation, from man to serpent, and that with the risk of no-return. Yet human beings and *nāgas* partly share the same environment and meet each other in battle, sacrifice, and marriage. In the numerous battles for precedence that take place between *nāgas*, men, gods, demons, and other heavenly beings, the *nāgas* never lose out completely and often retain their dominions or are reinstalled in others. Tradition also portrays them as ardent followers of both gods and men and especially of the Buddha.

1. The research on which this article is based was supported by a grant from the Netherlands Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (WOTRO). We are obliged to Dr. Kamal Prakash Malla for his keen comments on both matters of principle and numerous matters of detail. Thanks are also due to the members of the CASA (Leiden) and ERASME (Paris) teams of social anthropologists for giving their views on the paper as presented in a joint seminar on ritual. We would especially like to thank Hans Vermeulen for straightening out the text.

2. "Viṣakāmāś", Baudh ŚrS XVII, 18.

3. The term Nepal is employed here not to designate the modern state, but to denote the equivalent of Kathmandu Valley. The long-time inhabitants of the Valley are the speakers of a Tibeto-Burman language, Newari – as distinguished from the present national language Nepali which is of Indo-Aryan stock. Newari language – and especially its ritual terminology – has stood under continuous Sanscritic influence in historic times. Where necessary Newari words are mentioned below, but in case these derive from Sanskrit words still current in written or spoken language, preference has been given to the Sanskrit terms for reasons of comparison and general understanding. For the translation of Newari words the Newari-English dictionary by Thakür Lal Manandhar (1986) has been used.

Nāgas show a wide range of manifestation reaching from heaven to the underworld.⁴ They are the lightning in the sky and the clouds that affect the monsoon. As lords of the subterranean world (*pātāla/nāgaloka*) they have a kingdom of their own, which is through ponds, wells, anthills, lakes and riverine confluences connected to the earth. In Nepal it is above all Śeṣa Nāga who sustains the earth and every single house built on it, and who is held responsible for the occurrence of earthquakes. Nāgas are also generally venerated in Nepal for their power to release or thwart the rains. In every household they receive yearly worship during *Nāga Pañcamī*, which seems to be a direct continuation of the śravan full moon offerings to the snakes as prescribed by the Vedic grhyasūtras.⁵ Not only as semi-divine beings but also as animals, snakes are held in high esteem in Nepal. When occasionally encountered, they are to be worshipped and not to be killed. More often remaining invisible, they are supposed to guard the treasure box of the house.⁶

II. The site and the event

The sacrifice with serpents as victims, which is also observed in Nepal, appears to be in flat contradiction with the foregoing observations. Instead of the appeasement of snakes met in the Grhyasūtras and during Nāga Pañcamī, *sarpabali* here signifies the act of committing the serpents to the sacrificial fire (*homa*) alive. The problem is herewith stated. The incongruity of the serpents being sacrificed stands out all the more clearly since, from the sacrificial point of view, serpents cannot be considered proper sacrificial animals (*paśu*). Unlike *paśu*, the domesticated animals suitable for sacrifice, serpents are not the property of man. What then, exactly, is the value embodied by the snakes as objects of veneration on the one hand and as sacrificial victims on the other?

At first sight the scene of the sarpabali in Kathmandu seems to offer still further anomalies. Like most of the more elaborate animal sacrifices in Nepal do, it has the classic form of a *pañcabali*, a sacrifice consisting of five animals. But among the five animal species that are part of the sarpabali, three others are not *paśu* either. Three kinds of wild animals, grasshoppers, fishes and sparrows, precede the serpents into the fire. The fifth and last component of the *homa* consists of the head, the heart and the lungs of a buffalo – not a wild animal but not really a *paśu* either. In contrast to male goats and sheep, the most commonly sacrificed *paśu*, the buffalo does not have to show consent with the sacrifice. It is sacrificed anyhow, just as the wild animals are.⁷ The sarpabali consisting of those extraordinary ingredients is performed every year in the night preceding the new moon of November-December⁸ at the *pīṭha* (“seat”) of the goddess Indrāyanī in North-Western Kathmandu. The *pīṭha* is located just outside the city proper on the left bank of the Visnumati river and marked by a three-tiered pagoda-style temple⁹ facing north. The temple houses the stone

4. For an inventory, see J.Ph. Vogel 1926.

5. Winternitz 1885, p. 47-52, 250-264.

6. On the role of the various nāgas in Nepal see Slusser (1982: 353-361).

7. In a cursory description of the serpent fire-sacrifice, *Sarpāhutī Homa* (1981, Nepali) by Ramman Pradhan, it is told habitually that the animals are sacrificed “*sampkalpa gari*”, i.e. after indicating willingness. Such an indication is, however, not evident and it is hard to imagine the animals in question as giving their intention to be sacrificed.

8. The first new moon after Tihar (Diwali).

9. The temple is well-known for its antiquity and has recently been renovated. It has a wealth of

statues of Indrāyanī and other deities that belong to her following (*gana*). It is bordered by a burning ghat to the south, while north of it a platform extends containing the pits for the sacrificial fires (*homakunḍa*). In the tiled platform two homakuṇḍas of unequal size are formed, the smaller one just in front of the temple entrance, the larger one at ten yards distance in a straight line north of it. At present it is only in the larger firepit that a *homa* requiring serpent victims is still being performed (cf. van den Hoek 1990).

Though far from being common, the sarpabali as conducted at Indrāyanī is not unique in its kind. Serpent sacrifice is annually performed in at least one other spot in Kathmandu Valley. Further research is necessary before anything can be said about the uniformity of serpent sacrifices or about their interconnections.

The sarpabali here considered forms the climax of the festival of Indrāyanī, but, in some respects, also its anticlimax. Apart from the lord of the sacrifice (*jajmān*), people of a dozen other castes are involved in different stages of the festival at large, either as groups or as individual specialists. In striking contrast with the festival as a whole, the sarpabali is executed by the *jajmān* and his ritual specialist (*karmācārya*¹⁰) alone, with few onlookers being there in the depths of the new moon night. However, the value of the sacrifice outweighs its attendance, and the ashes of the fire are generally considered to be particularly powerful in averting evil. Since it is carried out by the *jajmān* and his specialist only, it seems easy and attractive to lift the sarpabali out of its complicated social context. And indeed, as we shall see, the sarpabali not only shows the features of being a closed circuit, but is also intended to be one. It takes place outside and without society and it is only its remnant, the ashes of the fire, that carry its fruit to the outside world. Although the ceremony is understood to carry a special weight, it remains at the same time incomprehensible, not only to the public at large, but also to the single sacrificer himself, who, unlike his *karmācārya*, has not undergone a Tantric initiation.

The text employed by his specialist is a secret one and the formulas which are nevertheless recited from it do not clarify the sarpabali. The sacrifice of the serpents is performed on the very eve of Indrāyanī's procession through the city, but does not at all share the overall public nature of the *yātrā*.¹¹ Such then is the setting of the riddle: the climax of the festival is reached in a solitary performance by its lord of sacrifice. The sacrificial suspense is built up and released in a ceremony that is self-contained and shrouded in mystery. And the ambivalence of the term sarpabali expresses the incongruity contained by it: instead of being worshipped with sacrifice, the serpents themselves are subjected to sacrificial death. In the actual proceedings of the sarpabali two pairs of snakes are involved. Both pairs are held right above the fire but only one of them is committed to the flames, while the other one is set free into the air. The ambivalence thus extends into the very proceedings of the sacrifice. The riddle is, however, not a new one, and the ambivalence not without precedence.

detail which cannot be dwelled upon here. A visual description, particularly of its beautiful gilt *torana*, is given by Punya Nakarmi in her short article "Viṣṇumatīko Indrāyanī Mandir: ek paricaya" (Nepali, 1984; before the renovation).

10. A class of Hindu officiants ranking below brahmins but playing a crucial role in the mostly Tantric ritual of Nepal. Their Buddhist counterparts are Vajrācārya's. Newar brahmins, in addition to not being numerous, mostly operate as housepriests of the higher castes and have but little role to play in the festivals of Kathmandu. They take no part at all in the Indrāyanī festival.

11. *Yātrā*: lit. "procession", but used with reference to a public festival at large.

III. The texts¹²: serpent sacrificers and serpent victims

The term sarpabali may be taken to mean a sacrifice to serpents, a sacrifice by serpents and a sacrifice consisting of serpents. The interesting thing is that all connotations occur. In several Vedic ritual texts it is the serpents themselves who perform a *sarpasattra* (sacrificial session of the serpents), such as in the above mentioned Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra (XVII, 18). They perform this sacrifice in order to obtain poison, or, as the parallel passage in the Pañcavimśa Brāhmaṇa has it (PVBr. XXV, 15, 4), in order to vanquish death. As evidenced by numerous texts, poison (*viṣa*) and the essence of immortality (*amṛta*) are two sides of the same coin, embodied by the serpent. A fascinating probe into serpent identity is offered by Shulman (1978) who links up classical texts with a maze of Tamil myths. The city of Madurai was once saved from a flood of poison by a few drops of amṛta from the moon on Śiva's crest, which turned the poison into buttermilk. In his analysis Shulman sets out to demonstrate how the dark-throated god himself incorporates a mighty serpent who marries a serpent maiden and who also dies and is reborn like a serpent.

The serpents thus embody the cycle of life and death and more especially the sacrificial cycle, in which the consecrated (*dikṣita*) is born anew from sacrificial death. In the words of the Pañcavimśa Brāhmaṇa: "Through performing the sarpasattra the serpents, having left aside their old hide, creep further, for they had vanquished death. The Ādityas [the foremost Vedic gods] are the serpents. They who undertake this [rite], to their share falls the shining out, as it were, of the Ādityas."¹³ The Ādityas are, as appears from textual concordance, likewise considered to be born from sacrificial remnants, namely those of Aditi's offerings.¹⁴

The Pañcavimśa Brāhmaṇa, most significantly, gives an elaborate list of names belonging to the officiants in the sarpasattra, together with their specialist functions in it. Some of those names are met again in a context quite different from the ritualist setting, namely in the great epic Mahābhārata. In the ritualist setting the serpents go unopposed; they gain immortality by performing the right action and saying the right formulas. There is no adversary from whom the desired poison or immortality has to be conquered. The image of the serpents performing their own sacrifice is still present in a lapidary reference in the Āpastamba Śrautasūtra,¹⁵ but then seems to die out in the ritual texts. The theme of self-sacrifice as such does not vanish, but persists in a variety of other formulas throughout the corpus of ritual texts (Heesterman 1987). The serpent, to be sure, does not disappear from the sacrificial scene either, but comes right to the fore again in the context of the great epic. This time the serpents stand out as victims in one of the world's most famous sacrifices: that of King Janamejaya, great-grandson of the Pāṇḍava hero Arjuṇa. Described in the Ādiparvan of the Mahābhārata, the sarpasattra of Janamejaya

12. The textual analysis given here is a shortenend version of an exposé prepared within the context of Prof. J.C. Heesterman's seminar on Vedic ritual, and has much profited from his directions.

13. PVBr. XXV, 15, 4, in the translation of Caland (1931, p. 642), who also noted the textual correspondences elaborated below.

14. Maitrāyanī Saṃhitā (I, 6, 12) and parallel passages in other ritual texts. The Ādityas are born from the sacrificial left-overs, *ucchista* or *śeṣa* – as in the name of the serpent Śeṣa sustaining the world. The world is born from sacrifice and upheld by it. For the ritual context of Aditi's offerings, see Heesterman (1983: 87 ff.).

15. Amidst ritual directives the Āp ŚrS only retains the following exemplary sentence: "Sarpāṇām sattrenāpa jarāṁ ghnante. Ādityānām ivaiṣām prakāśah", "By the sattra of the serpents they repel old age; their brilliance is like that of the Ādityas" (XXIII, 8). The text continues with a pun on the number ten (*daśa*) cf. *dañṣa*, which means a snakebite. In this way the serpents are incorporated in the numerical code of the ritual rules.

constitutes the very occasion on which the whole epic is being narrated. The Mahābhārata itself can first be considered the fruit or, again, the remains of the serpent sacrifice of Janamejaya. Referred to as a sarpasattra, the term does not in this case refer to a sacrifice performed by serpents, but to a holocaust consisting of serpents.

On the part of Janamejaya it was an act of revenge for the murder of his father Parikṣit by the Nāga chief Takṣaka. In turn, that murder formed part of a longer chain of pre-destined events¹⁶ that irrevocably led to the annihilation of the serpents in the sacrificial fire. Total extinction was however prevented by Āstika, son of a brahmin seer by a Nāga princess, and begotten to serve this very purpose. He succeeds in stopping the sacrifice at the very moment that the culprit Takṣaka is hanging above the fire – a situation paralleling the proceedings of the Kathmandu sarpabali. By then, a number of Takṣaka's kin and kind, who were irresistibly drawn into the fire, have perished. In his above-mentioned article, Shulman (1978, p. 126) argues that interruption of the sacrifice is essential, since otherwise it would remain without issue – without the vital seed to renew the cycle. In his view the serpents are first the victims and then the *vāstu*, the remnant/germ which the sacrifice aims at producing.

A list of victims is given in the books Āstika¹⁷; Takṣaka himself survives the sacrifice meant to destroy him. In Kathmandu Valley he remains, especially in Buddhist circles, one of the most venerated Nāga princes up to this very day. According to the authoritative view of Battery Ratna Vajrācārya it is Takṣaka who resides at the very pīṭha of Indrāyaṇi.¹⁸

The holocaust of King Janamejaya was executed at the place of catastrophe par excellence: Kurukṣetra, the sacrificial site of the gods and the battlefield of the gruesome war between the Pāñḍavas and the Kauravas. Janamejaya's serpent sacrifice thus has its antecedents in the struggle of the gods for the sacrifice¹⁹ and in the great sacrifice of war that brought about the all but total annihilation of the world. Kurukṣetra is, to borrow Girard's terminology (1972), the place of sacrificial crisis, from which eventually the present Kali Age was born. Yet not everything was destroyed in the massacre. The Pāñḍavas narrowly escaped total extinction and lived on into the new era through a thin line that led from Arjuṇa's son Abhimanyu to Parikṣit, father of Janamejaya. The Kauravas were wiped out, but their blind father Dhṛtarāṣṭra lived through the war; and his memories and foresights form a prelude to the Mahābhārata, demonstrating the inescapability of its chain of events.

The sarpasattra of Janamejaya emerges as a corollary of the great war that secures its literary legacy. In a more distant but still tangible way it also presents a variation on the pattern of the sarpasattra represented by the ritual texts mentioned above. All sacrificial stages appear to be interconnected.

Dhṛtarāṣṭra is the name of the father of the Kauravas, but also that of a well-known serpent lord who performs as a brahman officiant in the PVBr sarpasattra. Remarkably enough, the name Janamejaya also figures here, as an (*adhvaryu*) officiant and hence an associate of Dhṛtarāṣṭra in the serpents' conquest of death. In the epic setting the two names are brought together again through Janamejaya's sacrifice. Among those serpents that perished on that occasion, thirty five descen-

16. For a more general approach to the cycle of snake myths and its comparative Indo-European context see Oosten (1985), esp. p. 68-71 concerning the relationship between the snakes and the elixir of immortality.

17. Ādiparvan 1, 5, 52/57, transl. van Buitenen p. 120-121.

18. Personal communication. Indrāyaṇi is according to this view one of the eight "mother goddesses" (*asṭamātṛkas*) who are thought of as forming a circle (*mandala*) around Kathmandu. Every mātṛkā goddess' pīṭha has both a Bhairava and a Nāga residing there.

19. Satapatha Brāhmaṇa XIV, 1, 1.

dants of Dhṛtarāṣṭra's are mentioned by name. The parallel, of course, goes further than just the namesakes. In the epic setting the surviving Kaurava father Dhṛtarāṣṭra and the Pāṇḍava descendant Janamejaya can be considered the remnants of the great sacrifice of war. Their survival into the new age is comparable with the renewal of life that the snakes attain in the sacrifice of their own.

The great difference between the epic setting and the ritualist one is that in the former case the sacrifice is of an agonistic nature, while in the latter the exchange of violence is absent. In the ritualist setting the serpents achieve the aim of vanquishing their own death without any party opposing them – and, in fact, without any exchange at all. Telescoping the epic and the ritualist scene, the ambivalence of the sarpasattra stands out saliently. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, Janamejaya and the other serpent lords, are associates in the performance of a sacrifice of their own, while, as the sacrificer's party and the victim's party, they are opposed to each other in Janamejaya's sacrifice.

Takṣaka, whose bite killed Janamejaya's father and who for that reason forms the direct cause for the epic sarpasattra, appears in the PVBr. Sarpasattra as a brāhmaṇa singer, that is, as a fellow-officiant of Janamejaya and Dhṛtarāṣṭra. Intimately connected with the sarpasattra in both manifestations, Takṣaka is as it were the prototypical survivor who lives throughout the eras without being affected.

The textual sources are far from exhausted by these observations,²⁰ but sufficiently exposed to serve our purpose. They reveal the fundamental ambivalence of the sarpasattra. It is not, as Shulman (1978, p. 124) and other authors following Caland (1931, p. 641) have argued, that the sarpasattra of the PVBr. is the prototype of the one in the Mahābhārata. There even are good grounds to suppose exactly the opposite, namely that the Mahābhārata sacrifice represents an older model than the ritually sophisticated form in the Pañcavimśa Brāhmaṇa. As Heesterman (1985: 95-127) has convincingly shown, it was the breakthrough of agonistic patterns that marked the principal achievement of the ritualists. What matters here is that the two patterns, stemming from a primeval sarpasattra impossible to retrieve, continue to exist side by side in the present-day fabric of Hindu ritual. In Kathmandu the lord of the serpent-sacrifice appears to embody Janamejaya destroying his serpent adversaries in the sacrificial fire. At the same time serpents appear among those invited to the sacrifice. A jug representing the nāgas is placed unobtrusively alongside the main divinities attending the serpent sacrifice (see below, section V).

Regarding its procedures, the Nepalese sarpabali has an unmistakably ritualistic and sanskritic outlook. Within the broader context of the Indrāyaṇī festival it is only during the sarpabali that a text is recited by the karmācārya specialist. It is further significant that on that occasion the jajmān and his specialist are the sole actors in what appears to be a self-contained stage. Yet the very attempt to create such a closed circuit, brings out all the more clearly those aspects in which it is still linked to the outside world. Among those, one feature is of particular significance. While all the wild animals should in principle be found on the spot, the final item of the homa, the head of the buffalo, has to come from outside. This is not just a matter of a head being brought onto the stage. The head of the buffalo, as well as its lungs, originate in a previous sacrifice, carried out the night before inside the temple of Indrāyaṇī. In contrast to the sarpabali this buffalo sacrifice is not a solo performance but a ceremony carried out by members of three different castes (*jāt*), each of

20. In a striking reversal of descent, the Mahābhārata, itself the immortal issue from Janamejaya's sacrifice, is at that occasion narrated by Dhṛtarāṣṭra's father, the poet (*rishi*) Krṣṇa Dvaipara, son of Parāśara. The name Parāśara, in turn, is one of those victims mentioned as belonging to Dhṛtarāṣṭra's house who perished in Janamejaya's sacrifice.

them bringing its own buffalo. The buffaloes are sacrificed in a similar way by the same throat-cutter (*kasāi*), but their remains, and especially their heads, travel quite different ways. While in the sarpabali all victims end up neatly burnt to ashes, the buffalo sacrifice leaves the temple and its statues covered with blood, and the sacrificers with huge mortal remains. The single buffalo head that passes from the one stage to the other, obviously connects two ceremonies of quite different value.

IV. The head of the sacrifice

Unlike the serpent, it is commonly known what the buffalo stands for and why it is sacrificed. It represents Mahiṣāsura ("Buffalo Demon"), the great adversary of the Goddess, who acquired her epitheton, Mahiṣāsuramārdiṇī, by killing him. There is a whole gamut of demons opposing the Goddess, who herself also carries a great many names such as Devī, Durgā and, in this case, Indrāyaṇī, the *sakti* of Indra. The whole range is, however, reducible to the one opposed pair of the Goddess and the buffalo demon, and all buffalo sacrifices can likewise be reduced to the one battle between the Goddess and the buffalo demon, classically portrayed in the *Devimahātmya*. The relationship is not without its secrets, though, to which we will return in the conclusion.²¹ In the buffalo sacrifice, the Goddess is time and time again appeased with the blood of her enemy who, on a slightly more hidden level, is also her lover, her devotee, and, more controversially, her husband Śiva himself. On special nights, such as the sequence of *navarātri* celebrated throughout the sub-continent, the battle is thought to be acted out again in all vehemence, culminating in the victory of the Goddess (*Vijayadasāmi*, "the tenth day of victory").

The buffalo sacrifice which takes place at Indrāyaṇī pīṭha in the night preceding the new moon, also bears the characteristics of a war party. The three communities participating, the Malla (singularly present in the Thakū juju's person), the Manandhar (oilpressers), and the Prajāpati (potters), have to address each other respectively as *Thakū juju* (New.: "king"), *Mantri* ("minister") and *Māhān* (soldier). A fine is imposed on transgressing the rule during the ceremony. The hierarchy existing between the different *jāt* is thus transformed into a ranking order befitting the violent enterprise.²²

The kings (*Thakū juju*) of the Malla lineage trace their descent to the dynasty that ruled over the northern city (Thane) about a thousand years ago in a period of political fission.²³ Other kings held sway in the southern city (Kvane) at the time and another goddess, Bhadrakālī, is till the present day regarded as belonging to the southern part. The division has lost political relevance but is still crucial in giving shape to the city as a sacrificial arena. The yātrā of Bhadrakālī takes place four months later (or, alternatively, eight months earlier) than that of Indrāyaṇī. In their processions both deities cross the boundaries of their respective realms, without however infringing upon the immediate surroundings of each other's pīṭhas. The story of the origin of their antagonism includes the account of the installation of the sarpabali by the Thakū juju (summarized below, section V).

21. For the intricacies of the relationship in different regions and contexts, see Biardeau (ed.), *Autour de la Déesse hindoue*, published as *Puruṣārtha*, vol. 5, Paris 1981.

22. And, it may be suggested, devaluating considerations of purity and pollution that pertain to hierarchy. The three sacrificing communities meet here in circumstances that carry a heavy load of danger and pollution, but they cannot afford to be concerned.

23. The period of the Thakūri rulers who succeeded the Licchavi dynasty constitutes a dark age from the point of view of inscriptive evidence. For further details see Dr. K.P. Malla (1980).

The festival of Bhadrakālī²⁴ has its own fire sacrifice (*homa*) which, however, does not include serpents. Each deity also has its own *dyochem* (New. “deity’s house”) which in contrast to the *pīṭhas* is located within the city walls. Indrāyanī’s *dyochem* is inside the residence of the Thakū juju in the Tyauda quarter of Northern Kathmandu. It contains the two bronze procession statues of Indrāyanī and the bronze masks of her *gāyā*,²⁵ her following consisting of the *aṣṭamātṛka* (“the eight mother goddesses”), Bhairava and Gaṇeśa. The itinerary between the *dyochem* and the *pīṭha* is of particular ritual importance. Along this route the sacrificial buffalo of the Thakū juju is first taken when still alive, while after the sacrifice its head and lungs are carried in procession back and forth along the same route.

The buffalo of the Thakū juju is the first of the three to be killed after an elaborate initiatory ritual that must remain undiscussed here. Prior to the killing a special substance (New: *bāupa*) prepared by the sacrificer’s wife, is placed on the *kṣetrapāla* (lord of the area) stone inside the temple to satisfy the *bhūt-pret*. These wandering ghosts are the foremost of a host of demonic beings attracted by the sacrifice and prone to disturb it. The Pode jāt of executioners and fishermen, who by ancient right are the guardians and sweepers of the temple, are entitled to the *bāupa* and other leftovers of the sacrifice.²⁶

Before the throat of the first buffalo dragged into the temple is actually cut, the *jajmān* performs *pūjā* (worship) of the hands of the butcher, his knife and the head of the buffalo that is to be sacrificed. When the first victim is slaughtered and its blood squirted all over the temple and its statues, the Manandhar perform their preparatory *pūjā* outside and the Prajāpati await their turn. After the respective killings the *Kasāi* (butchers) cut off the heads of the victims and remove the entrails. Finally the three heads are displayed in a row facing the blood covered statue of Indrāyanī and two other idols on her right side. The heads are covered on top with chunks of raw meat already slaughtered (the sacrificial share due to the *Kasāi*). On their brows wicks are kindled which are reflected in eyes that still look alive.

The ways of the heads thereafter separate and so do the ways of the three communities, which met for sacrifice but further celebrate their festivals apart from each other. The heads and the corpses of the buffaloes sacrificed by Manandhar and Prajāpati are carried to the houses of their respective *guthi* (< Skt *goṣṭhi*: lit. “cow-pen”, “stable”). Although different kinds of *guthi* are distinguished in Nepal,²⁷ it is the *sanā* and *sī guthis*, the death and cremation societies, that are at the foundation of the system as a whole. While usually the term “socio-religious association” is given as a general definition of *guthi*, the nature of the *sanā* or *sī guthi* may, in our opinion, better be rendered by the notion of “sacrificial community”. The sacrifices of the community include, as a matter of course, the last sacrifice that human beings

24. For a description see Rajendra Pradhan, “Domestic and Cosmic Rituals among the Hindu Newars of Kathmandu, Nepal”, Ph. D. thesis, Delhi 1986, p. 340-356. Pradhan, who gives a valuable overview of Kathmandu festivals, also includes a short survey of Indrāyanī jātrā (p. 285-291). By its very briefness this description tends to amalgamate different stages of the ritual; instead of being clearly distinguished, buffalo sacrifice and *sarpbali* thus run together.

25. These are the same figures as portrayed in stone in the temple. The dualism of brass procession images (*utsava mūrti*) and fixed stone statues (*mūla mūrti*) exists throughout the subcontinent (cf. Van den Hoek, 1979, for South India). The duality of *dyochem* and *pīṭha*, common in Kathmandu Valley, appears to be a more specifically Nepalese form of that opposition (Toffin, 1982; Pradhan, 1986).

26. Cf. above: left-overs of a sacrifice never form a neutral substance but fit into the bipolarity of *amṛta* and *viṣa*. At least from the viewpoint of the high castes, the Pode shares of sacrifice are to be classified as poison. However, from their low position in hierarchy the Pode derive a ritual power rivalling that of the high priestly castes – though being of a different nature and value.

27. For a discussion of *guthi* as functioning within one particular caste (Citrakār), see Toffin in *L’Ethnographie*, No. 70 (1975-2) and Collin Rosser in von Fürer-Haimendorf (ed.), 1966.

are bound to perform: that of committing their bodies to the flames of the funeral pyre. The idea of the sacrificial community, oriented towards man's ultimate sacrifice, therefore reflects the fundamental nature of the institution of *sanā* cq. *sī guthi* in Nepalese society.

In both the Manandhar and the Prajāpati case the *guthi* that presides over the Indrāyanī buffalo sacrifice is also the *sī-guthi*, a small association of five to seven members that is in charge of the actual cremation of the members of the much larger *sanā guthi* (that, in the case of the Prajāpati, counts 110 members in North-Kathmandu). Both kinds of *guthi* are based on caste and locality and more especially on the use of a common cremation ghat by their members. The burning ghats themselves belong to a locality, but their actual space is again carefully subdivided according to caste. Furthermore, in the case of the Indrāyanī cremation grounds, a radical hierarchical distinction exists between the ghat just south of the temple and the Karṇadīp ghat on the other side of the river, the latter being reserved for members of the higher castes.

The Prajāpati *sī-guthi* not only takes care of the cremation of members of their own community's *sanā guthi*, but also serves the higher caste Shrestha people in concluding their cremations at Karṇadīp Ghat. It is in the pattern of *sanā* – and *sī-guthis* that the social structure reveals itself. Society revolves around death. While considerations of purity effect the separation between communities, it is the necessary handling of impurity that effects their exchange. Directed as it is towards death, the *sī-guthi* is for that very reason the most important institution of Newar society, on which everybody is ultimately dependent. In addition to channeling the impurity of death, the *sī* and *sanā guthi* fulfill a number of other social functions such as the organization of festivals. Especially in the case of Indrāyanī, through the close connection of the Goddess with the burning ghat, it is mostly the *sī-guthi* which takes care of her festival.

Following the ritual bipartition of Kathmandu into a northern and a southern half, the Manandhar are divided into Thane and Kvane *sanā* and *sī-guthi*. The Thane *sanā guthi* cremates its dead at Indrāyanī ghat. The *sī-guthi* that is in charge of the actual cremations as well as of the Indrāyanī festival, counts five members, and it is among those that the head of the sacrificial buffalo is divided. The head is split into prescribed parts (also called *sī*) which are distributed among the *sī-guthi* members in order of seniority. In case of the Manandhar *sī-guthi* the ranks are closed by the keeper (*pāla*) of the secret deity which circulates in their *sanā guthi*. According to Ravi Narayan Manandhar who had been *pāla* in 1987 and who gave us a fascinating account of his ritual office, the secret deity announces every approaching death to the *pāla* four days in advance.

The festival of the Manandhar lasts nine days, but ritual observances extend over a full month. The day before the buffalo sacrifice the *sī-guthi* members withdraw from their families to spend four nights together at the ground floor of the *pāla*'s house.²⁸ Their retreat pertains to the night preceding the sacrifice, the sacrificial night itself, the subsequent night, and finally the new moon night. In the daytime they have to perform several ritual tasks at the Indrāyanī pīṭha as well. Formerly the members used to build a *balacha*, a grass-roofed hut in which to take up their

28. It should be noticed that the ground floor is not a place of honour in a Newari house. The six *guthi* members are death-tainted and their retreat seems to be prompted by at least partial untouchability rather than by an increased concern for purity. The leaves from which the six have eaten their meals must be taken out by one of them in absolute silence to the cross-roads, the site of Chvāsa Māi where generally things of ultimate impurity are being disposed of. According to their own saying, the deity of death (New. *devam*) takes possession of them during those four days.

temporary residence. Although they nowadays perform their secret pūjās at the ground-floor of the pāla's house, they still exclude everybody else from the secret, including their own wives and mothers. The pāla's wife has her own duty, which is to prepare the great amount of foods and pūjā items used by them. These things are, however, not served or carried by her but by a *jyāpu* (peasant caste) attendant.

In the early morning, the buffalo head is taken from the place of sacrifice on a bamboo stick carried by two people. It is received with a *lasakusa* ceremony at the pāla's residence. The *lasakusa* (New.) is a general welcoming ceremony which is performed both at the reception of a deity and at the reception of a bride in her husband's house, or, in this case, at the reception of the buffalo head. A key element of the welcoming pūjā is the presentation of the housekey to the incomer. After its reception, the buffalo head is hidden in a chowk where nobody is allowed to look at it, except the guthi members who worship it for four days. The meat of the buffalo is cooked and served at the feast to which on new moon night the wider circle of the sanā guthi (25 members) is invited. After these guests have departed the head itself is cooked, cut up and then divided among the sī-guthi members, following the standard pattern of: right eye to the eldest, left eye (second eldest), right ear (third), left ear (fourth), nose (fifth), and finally the tongue to the one among them whose turn it is to be *pāla* at the next year's festival.²⁹ On the new moon night, when the *sī* (the shares in the head of the sacrifice) have been distributed, the new *pāla* has to carry the *sī* assigned to him, *i.e.* the tongue of the buffalo, to his house. He is not to speak to anybody on the way, while conversely not even a dog will bark at him because of the divine power present in the tongue he carries. The next day the ban on exchange is lifted and the tongue is consumed by the *pāla* and his wife together. The same day the image of the *sī*-guthi deity is also brought to his house – in secret.

From the last episode it appears that the new *pāla* acquires the strength to receive the deity from the *sī* he brings with him. The identity of the deity, whose name and form are secret, reflects the very identity of Death, who announces the arrival of nobody but himself. The four days advance notice that the secret deity gives of an approaching death, and the four days that the fraternity spends in seclusion before the deity makes his arrival in the house of the new *pāla*, can hardly be a coincidence. The secret will not be pursued here, but some more light can be shed on the totality of ritual proceedings by comparing the course taken by the Manandhar's head of the sacrifice with that followed by the Thakū juju's buffalo head.

While the latter, it is remembered, ends up in the sarpabali, consumed by the fire, the Manandhar's head of sacrifice is divided into parts and consumed by the *sī*-guthi members. The tongue, however, is singled out to be carried from seclusion into the new *pāla*'s household and into the next day (*pāru*), the first of a new month and a new yearly cycle. The remnant of the sacrifice is, in other words, reintegrated again by society. It forms the essence from which the new *pāla* and his wife derive their strength to withstand the deity brought into their house. By housing the secret deity they are, again, serving society – that is, the particular Manandhar community of North Kathmandu.

One main difference in the course followed by the respective heads is the way of their disposal: consumed by the fire versus consumed by the select fraternity. Another major difference consists in the division of the head into *sī* parts in the Manandhar case, as opposed to its remaining undivided in the case of the Thakū juju's *homa*. In the latter case the lungs of the buffalo are further added to the *homa* in

29. This chosen one also has to bear the costs of the feast next day, when the seclusion is lifted and the guthi members are allowed to ascend from the ground floor.

order to represent the whole animal being committed to the fire. Finally, whereas the Thakū juju employs a specialist who uses a text, the Manandhar carry out their ritual without any written text and without a specialist assisting, entirely relying on esoteric knowledge.

However, there is also a similarity between the two cases, which exists in the identification of both the single Thakū juju sacrificer and the small Manandhar collectivity with their respective heads of sacrifice. In both cases the severed head is received with a welcoming ceremony that proves that we are dealing with more than just a dead buffalo's head. The Thakū juju's case will be treated in some more detail below.

As for the Manandhar, they are worshipping the head for four subsequent days after its reception, while nobody else is allowed access to it during that time. At last they are consuming it, not for the sake of nutrition of course, but to incorporate it. The period of seclusion containing the sacrifice can be viewed as a passage through death, which is concluded with the passage of the secret deity itself to its new location. The sacrificers themselves, by incorporating the sacrifice with which they have identified, are thereby conquering their own death. But, unlike the prototypical Prajāpati, they are not able to conquer death for once and for all,³⁰ but just to channel it for the next yearly cycle. Death keeps circulating among them, and the secret deity remains more powerful than its devotees. It may even herald death at the very moment of their sacrificial exertion. The fusion of the symbolic passage through death and the handling of real death is avoided. In case a death occurs during the period of ritual observances, the sī-guthi cannot function as a cremation society. In that case other members of the sanā guthi have to take over their task. If a member of the sī-guthi or one of his close family dies preceding the festival, all ritual observances are cancelled – all except the buffalo sacrifice itself, which by that very fact proves to be an absolute necessity, a matter of live and death.

The interplay between death and its shareholders is thus bound to remain full of contingency. By contrast, the handling of the buffalo head by the Thakū juju and its disposal in the sarpabali show another ritual procedure and a different train of thought underlying it.

V. The sarpabali

The buffalo sacrifice is situated at a ritual junction from which different paths diverge. The one taken by the Thakū juju will now be followed to its conclusion. As in case of the Manandhar, the buffalo head is received with a welcoming ceremony (*lasakusa*), at the residence of the Thakū juju.³¹ Prior to its official reception the head is taken by members of the *jyāpu* (farmer's) caste in a procession around Tyauda quarter, together with the heart and lungs which are enclosed in a earthen fire-pot,³² covered up with stretched intestines. This cover is removed by the *jyāpu*

30. See Heesterman's (1964-1985 p. 32-34) analysis of Jaiminiya Brāhmaṇa, 2, 69-70.

31. The present incumbent is Badri Rāj Malla, who supplied us with a wealth of information on his ritual office. Scrutinizing the course of events again in Nov. 1989, we found that the head is carried from the place of sacrifice straight to the sacrificial (*kṣetrapāla*) stone in the dyochem, where it remains until the following evening. The heart and lungs are carried to the place of worship in the kitchen on the top floor of the house, where they likewise remain for one day. Only then are they taken out in procession and received again with *lasakusa*.

32. Together called *himakah*, from (New.) *hi*: "blood", and *makah*: "a pot to carry fire". The object

carriers in a courtyard with a sunken cavity containing a stone representing *kṣetrāpāla* (the lord of the area). The disclosure of the pot and the worship of head and lungs might signify their reanimation. However, as no participant explanation could be obtained whatsoever, this interpretation must remain a conjecture for the time being. What seems to happen is that the head and the lungs of the buffalo are, through this worship and by the subsequent ceremonial reception, prepared for being sacrificed a second time.

Meanwhile a *kasāi* (butcher's caste) officiant is worshipping the wood for the fire-sacrifice in the courtyard of the dyochem. In former times the *kasāi* were responsible for providing the wood from the jungle with regard to which they held wood-cutting rights. With the disappearance of the more diffuse and differentiated rights to the soil, the wood is now being acquired from a timber cooperative with the support of a government subsidy. Yet the *kasāi* officiant worshipping the wood is for the occasion dressed like a Newar king-priest (*juju*) of former times – indicating the more extensive rights and the *kṣatriya* status that the *kasāi* enjoyed, according to their own saying, in previous times.

After all this worship in and around the dyochem, the wood is carried to the *pīṭha* by the *kasāi*, while the head and the pot with the heart and lungs are taken there by *jyāpu* (farmers) who assist the Thakū *juju*. The metal images of Indrāyanī and her *gaṇa*,³³ which must precede them, have by this time been lifted from their palanquin and placed in front of the respective stone images in the temple. Between the temple and the large homakunda, a U-formed sandstrip is then layed out on which conical rice-cakes (*gvahjā*)³⁴ and earthen jars (*kalaś*) are placed in which several deities are again invoked preceding the *homa*. Those represented by a 8 (with their image painted on it by the Citrakar specialist) are Indrāyanī herself, Kaumāri, Gaṇeśa and remarkably the Nāg (nāgas) as well. The *kalaś* of the latter is called Nāgpāy.³⁵ It is much smaller than the three jars lodging the three other divinities and similar in shape to the one in which the serpent victims are kept before being sacrificed. An unnamed Nāg is also present in a wooden pillar (New.: *yo sim*) erected that day in the northeastern corner of the temple compound, but it is not involved in this *pūjā* (worship) nor in the *homa* (fire sacrifice) that follows. The performance of both the *pūjā* and the *homa* are in the hands of the Thakū *juju* and his karmācārya priest.

In the homakuṇḍa the wood is laid crosswise in twelve layers. The fire is kindled by the *jajmān* with a small bundle of split pieces of wood (*sinta*) soaked in ghee, which in turn are lighted by the karmācārya from a *sukundā* (oil-light). The latter fire, however, is not brought from the dyochem or elsewhere; it may be lit unceremoniously. The fire-pot (*himakah*) which is carried to the place of sacrifice, it is remembered, does not contain fire, but the heart and lungs of the sacrificial buffalo. At the one other occasion that the Thakū *juju* and his karmācārya perform a *homa*³⁶ the

used may indicate an equivalence between the heart and lungs (as *prāṇa*) and the fire that is to consume them.

33. A so-called eye-opening ceremony (New. *dr̥ṣṭi kankegu*) has been performed for Indrāyanī by a member of the Citrakār (painter) caste, who acts as an individual specialist. All images are then placed in a *khat*, a palanquin. There are two statues of Indrāyanī, the smaller one of which remains hidden behind the larger one all during the *yātrā*. The bronze masks that represent the *gaṇa* of the Goddess are placed beneath her in the *khat*, forming a semi-circle.

34. *Gvahjā*: these red-pointed turrets of rice flour are used in all Nepalese sacrifices to invoke deities. They serve as a receptacle only and are abandoned after the event.

35. A term identified by Gutschov *et al.* as an art figure consisting of twisted snakes (1987, p. 50, 240).

36. That occasion is the *maraḥyah*, the feeding of the children, which cannot be described here. It

lungs of a buffalo are the only animal ingredient in an otherwise vegetarian sacrifice, hence suggesting a close connection between the lungs and the fire.

Generally, the source of fire is not indifferent, as is evidenced by the assertion that every year Jyāpu from the town of Kirtipur come down to the Thakū juju's sarpabali homa to steal some of its smouldering fire after the officiants have left – to use it in turn for the homa of their own Indrāyaṇī pīṭha.

After the fire has been kindled, the karmācārya makes an oblation of 32 kinds of grains, beans and fruits into the fire, accompanied by *mantras* (ritual formulas). Next to that, but without accompanying formulas, one pair of each of the living animals is first set free into the air, while another pair of them is thrown into the stirred up fire, this time by the Thakū juju himself. One pair of sparrows is cast into the fire and one pair of them is set free into the air. Pairs of grasshoppers and pairs of fishes undergo the same procedure. Then the Thakū juju triumphantly holds up a snake in each of his hands and hurls them into the air. Another pair of snakes is subsequently held above the fire and then flung into it. The heart and lungs of the buffalo which were kept in the fire-pot, are then committed to the fire, as if supplying the sacrifice with breath. Finally the flames are stirred up high by additional logs of wood, and the huge buffalo head is lifted by the Thakū juju above the blazing fire. It is committed to the flames unpaired, without the symmetry of a counterpart that lives on – unless we consider the jajmān himself to embody that counterpart. This possibility will be scrutinized in the analysis presented below.

After the homa has been completed and the jajmān and his company have eaten the *samāy-baji*,³⁷ they cannot just return home, but have to placate a number of spirits and gods on the way back to the dyochem. These deities, who have been aroused by the sarpabali, cannot be presented with shares from the main sacrifice, since that leaves only ashes. They receive offerings (*bali*) of *catām mari* – thin pancakes of rice flower which are to be thrown into the air at well-defined locations.

At sunrise people coming from the fields and the town apply the ashes of the homa to their foreheads, either in passing or as part of a more elaborate worship. The day is favorable for the execution of private blood sacrifices in the temple, supervised by the Poḍe custodians.

After this short survey of the proceedings of the sarpabali, it is time to turn in a more detailed manner to the question whether the sarpabali as it emerges from ancient sources on the one hand, and the ceremony as it is performed in Nepal on the other hand, can clarify each other. In the absence of a participant's explanation, the form of the Nepalese sarpabali remains largely unintelligible when viewed in itself. As has been noticed above, it shares some salient features with Janamejaya's sarpasattra in the Mahābhārata. Just like Janamejaya, the Thakū juju holds the power to put the snakes to death, or, alternatively, to set them free. Several informants even ascribed the same motive to the Thakū juju for sacrificing the snakes as the one held by Janamejaya: one of his ancestors allegedly was killed by the bite of a poisonous snake. This reason, however, is not confirmed by the Thakū juju himself, who instead states that a sarpabali is carried out because the fury of the Goddess can only be placated with an extraordinary sacrifice.

takes place in summer at the Chamuṇḍeśvarī pīṭha inside the city, nowadays inside the building of Ināp Press amidst the printing blocks.

37. A mixture of beaten rice, burned meat, soyabeans and ginger which is taken together with alcohol after most Nepalese sacrifices. According to Baldev Juju, author of *Nepa:ya Tāntrik Dyah va Tāntrik Pūjā* (New.), the five ingredients represent the five elements (alcohol: tejas, meat: prithivi, soyabeans: vāyu, beaten rice: akāś, ginger: jala) and together are equivalent to a human sacrifice.

What then is the cause of the Goddess' fury and why exactly can it only be cooled down by means of a sarpabali? The answer to the first part of the question can be found in a story that is well-known all over Kathmandu. Many different versions exist, but the common core is that Indrāyanī, or Luti Ajimā as her Newari name goes ("Grandma of the Liquid Gold") is invited to a party by her elder sister Bhadrakālī or Lumaru Ajimā ("Grandma of the Golden Bread"). In contrast to her sister, Indrāyanī is very poor, and she comes to the sacrificial meal with a train of hungry children. On arrival, however, she discovers that the party has already been concluded the day before, and that only leftovers³⁸ remain for her and her children. Terribly offended she roams about the countryside in search of food, but the only thing she can find to eat is a large pumpkin (of the kind that can replace a buffalo in sacrifice, New.: *bhuyuphasi*). For hours she tries to cook the pumpkin but to no avail. Next morning the pumpkin appears to have changed into gold and all of a sudden Indrāyanī and her children are rich.

Some versions recorded³⁹ show an explicit and perhaps deliberate connection with the sarpabali. Having left her sister's home hungry and offended, Indrāyanī is told to catch every animal she can get hold of in the fields, and these animals happened to be grasshoppers, fishes, pigeons, and finally two snakes who together approached from the north. After having asked permission from Indra to eat those animals, she roasted all of them in the fire – except for the snakes which she cooked in an earthen pot. Every drip of steam coming from that cooking pot changed into gold, while in addition the cooked snakes served as food for her children and herself.

In the version of the Thakū juju himself it is his ancestor, a king, who takes care of the desperate and furious Goddess and her children. Only by an exceptional sacrifice can she be placated, and it is the sarpabali which fulfils that requirement.

Some versions show a compromise between the idea of the hunting goddess and that of the caring king who installs the sacrifice. In that case the animals are said to be caught by the Goddess first and then sacrificed by the king after he has taken care of her.

In the version in which the king does not make his appearance, the sacrificial dimension of the Goddess' safari is still indicated by the transformation of her catch into gold. The pumpkin unequivocally refers to the head of a buffalo, and thus to the head of the sacrifice that we met above in the description of the sarpabali. The regularity which can furthermore be discerned in the various versions of the story is that when a pumpkin appears, the king does not, and when the king is present, the pumpkin is not. The pumpkin seems to replace the king, who himself embodies the head of the sacrifice. As was already observed, the sacrifice is at the same time identified with the enemy, the buffalo demon whose bodily form is sacrificed by the king on behalf of the Goddess.

The ambivalence cannot be overcome: it is the very essence of sacrifice as conceived here, and, one might add, in Indian tradition as a whole. Heesterman traces the central theme back to the ambivalent position of Prajāpati in Vedic ritual, and puts it as follows:

"The mystery of the cosmogonic act of sacrifice, then, comes down to the unresolved tension between the monistic view of self-sacrifice, and the dualistic view of sacrifice by a separate agency. The two properties do not exclude each other. They

38. Cf. above and f.n. 13 for the hidden meaning of sacrificial leftovers.

39. The most elaborate versions of the stories connected with Indrāyanī were told to us by Bodhi Ratna Vajrācārya. The details are interesting for a number of reasons, but cannot be included here.

keep shifting, fusing and going apart again in each single context" (Heesterman, 1987: 92-93).

A similar ambiguity permeates the sacrifice of the snakes, which is, as appeared from textual evidence, either performed by the snakes themselves, or executed by a separate agency with the snakes as victims. The sarpabali performed at Indrāyañī contains aspects of both manifestations. This fusion of viewpoints means that the serpents attend the very sacrifice of which they are the victims. The Nepalese sarpabali blends the perspectives that are represented separately in the ritual texts on the one hand and in the sarpasattra of the Mahābhārata on the other hand.

This view, however, does not yet account for the whole structure of the sarpabali as witnessed in Nepal. It contains three more species of animals, which do not qualify for self-sacrifice, namely birds, fishes and grasshoppers, representing animals of the air, the water and the land respectively. If the snakes are included here, they represent animals that traverse the three spheres (cf. above). While from the viewpoint of self-sacrifice the snakes can be taken together with the (buffalo) head of the sacrifice, they can equally well be classified with the three other species in order to make up the totality of life. The latter aspect, showing the universality of the fire-sacrifice, co-exists and fuses with the idea of self-sacrifice, or, to put it shortly: the self-sacrifice has a cosmic significance. The line which connects the serpent sacrifice with the all-devouring fire can in turn be traced to the Mahābhārata, namely to the great fire in the Khāṇḍava forest which is described in the last book of the Adiparvan.⁴⁰

The fire in the Khāṇḍava forest is a holocaust originating in the hunger of Agni, who, in his destructive activity, is supported by Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa. Indeed, like the sarpasattra of Janamejaya, the burning of the Khāṇḍava forest can again be seen as a corollary of the great war.⁴¹ And, once more, the nāga Takṣaka proves to be a connecting figure. Although he has his residence in the Khāṇḍava forest, he happens not to be present there at the time of the burning. While living beings of all kinds are perishing in the fire of the Khāṇḍava forest, Takṣaka, tellingly enough, happens to be at the great battlefield and sacrificial arena of the gods, Kurukṣetra. Reversely, the ritualistic sarpasattra as rendered by the Baudhāyana Śrautasūtra (XVII, 18), is said to take place in the Khāṇḍava forest: the two sites of sacrificial crisis merge into each other.

Although the burning of the Khāṇḍava forest assumes the form of an all-embracing holocaust, it again proves possible for a few beings to escape the fire. Among them is Takṣaka's son Aśvasena, who is saved by following a course opposite to birth: he is swallowed by his mother and hence goes unnoticed at the critical moment. Aśvasena emerges again from the body of his dead mother, thus showing a development that forms a remarkable variation on the more general sacrificial theme – in which rebirth or immortality is obtained from the passage through death.

Apart from Aśvasena the only beings to escape the conflagration are the *Asura* Maya and four birds (*śarṅgakas* or "hornbills") which are *brahmavādinah*, speaking brahma, and which are interpreted by Biardeau (1971/1972) and Hiltebeitel (1985) as representing the four Vedas. Conceived in that way the four Vedas are the remnants of the great fire and can be compared with the Mahābhārata as the literary issue of Janamejaya's sarpasattra. Takṣaka, who is a central figure linking the two holocausts, escapes both fires and lives on through the change of eras without seemingly

40. For a textcritical structural analysis of the story see Alf Hiltebeitel: "The Burning of the Forest Myth", in Bardwell Smith (ed.), 1975, p. 208-224.

41. For this view, see M. Biardeau (1981, p. 140-141), criticized by Hiltebeitel (1985, p. 219).

being affected. He thereby embodies the very image of sacrifice revolving around itself – and of its ultimate aim: immortality.

The position of the serpents in the Nepalese sarpabali can now be more clearly understood: they are the name-givers of the sacrifice because they form its ideological pivot. In one and the same form the snakes express the ambiguity of sacrifice that exists in the fusion between being slain and reaching immortality. That ambiguity extends into the duality of the sacrificer and the head of the sacrifice. For also the fifth category of the sacrifice, the buffalo head, proved to be ambivalent in referring both to the Asura and to the sacrificer himself, to the king as well as to his enemy. The form of the sarpabali is analogous to the Vedic *puruṣamedha*, in which four of the victims are *paśu* (domesticated animals) while the fifth category is ambivalent in this respect: the human head of the sacrifice can be equated with a sacrificed *paśu* but also with the sacrificer himself. As Heesterman has shown, the human head required for building the fire-altar must be obtained from outside, from the battlefield, without apparent distinction between the victims of the friendly and those of the enemy's side: "The human head – the head of the sacrifice – should be the head of a *kṣatriya* (*rājanya*) or a *vaiśya* killed by an arrow or by lightning."⁴² Neither in the Vedic sacrifice nor in the Nepalese sarpabali does the circuit of sacrifice prove to be fully closed. The human head in the Vedic sacrifice has to be imported from outside, from the sacrifice of war. Likewise the buffalo head in the sarpabali has to be imported from a previous sacrifice. In the Nepalese case, this leaves us with the concluding question how the two subsequent sacrifices can be related to each other.

VI. Conclusion

The buffalo sacrifice, in which three communities participate, is embedded in social exchange. The three parties not only interact, but also distribute the meat of their buffalos among the members of their respective communities – and, in case of the Thakū juju, among his dependents as well. While the buffalo sacrifice is social by nature, the sarpabali is essentially not. The fire-sacrifice is set up to be universal in itself. The particular form it takes in the sarpabali can be related to the mythical conflagration of the Khāṇḍava forest – the clearing of the wilderness. By including animals from the land, the water and the air, as well as the snakes belonging to all spheres together, the sarpabali shows an all-embracing scope. On a level different but inseparable from that, it attains the same encompassing value from its quality of self-sacrifice. The snakes in the sarpabali provide the link between the idea of self-sacrifice and the idea of a universal sacrificial victim incorporating all spheres of the world. Since ancient times the snake embodies the very image of sacrifice and immortality – and, one may add, of the universal enemy as well, of *Vṛtra* slain and incorporated by Indra. The snake's ambivalent nature of being victim and sacrificer together is matched by man (*puruṣa*), who shares this capacity. In the Nepalese sarpabali the ambivalence is likewise extended to the duality of the sacrificer and the buffalo head – the head of the sacrifice being interchangeable with the sacrificer himself.

In contrast to the sarpabali, the buffalo sacrifice is executed right in front of the Goddess, and the victim represents her enemy, Mahiṣāsura, whose blood is sprayed on the statue of the Goddess to placate her anger. A clear duality seems to be

42. Heesterman (1985, p. 52) on Āp ŚrS XVI, 6, 2.

present here, and an exchange takes place between the sacrificers and the Goddess. Yet features of fusion are also present, as the buffalo demon is at the same time known to be the Goddess' lover who strives to unite with her. What then exactly is the relationship between the Goddess, the demon, and the sacrificers? And why is the role of kṣatriya, of demon-slayer, being left to a female divinity, not only in Nepal but in the greater part of South Asia? A tentative answer to these questions may be given here, taking as a point of departure the pattern of social exchange that characterizes the buffalo sacrifice in contrast to the sarpabali. Rather than being a quality inherent in the Goddess or her feminality, her power seems to derive from the relationships she entertains with the parties concerned, both with the enemy and with what may be called her own party. Not really belonging to either, she embodies the shifting relationships between them, from alliance to war. She contracts and embraces the opposites, and it is here that fusion again enters the picture. As the *sakti* of the king (his female counterpart providing him with power), she protects his realm and its inhabitants against evil and assault. At the same time, however, she partakes of the other side represented by Mahiṣāsura. The relationship between the king and the Goddess is as ambivalent as that between the Goddess and the demon-king; she belongs to both sides and demands devotion from both of them – or their death. The Goddess embodies exchange itself, alliance and war, life and death. Her paradoxical relationship with Mahiṣāsura compresses this very idea in a powerful way. The Goddess' relation with the king equals the one she maintains with his enemy. Here again, although in a way quite different from the sarpabali, an ultimate identification is brought about between sacrificer and victim – through the mediation of the Goddess standing between them.

The sarpabali breaks away from this exchange pattern and establishes a ritualistic universe in which no other party is acting or thought to be acting than the sole sacrificer, and in which no blood is being shed. The absence of exchange explains why the Goddess Indrāyanī, although invoked, is not involved in the proceedings of the fire-sacrifice. For in the latter case it is not the relationships which are ritualized but the very absence of them. Here it is, in other words, not society which is seen as cosmomorphic, but its contrary: the absolute individual, who encompasses all relationships and maintains none. The serpent sacrifice itself, finally, leaves nothing but ashes, which, though being of extraordinary value, do not carry any social distinction.

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Résumé

Alors qu'au Népal on vénère habituellement les serpents, dans le cas présent, deux serpents sont sacrifiés. Ce sacrifice, apparemment hors norme, a lieu la veille de la procession annuelle d'Indrāyanī – déesse du Nord, à Kathmandu –, autour de la cité ancienne. Avec les serpents, trois autres espèces d'animaux sont offerts dans un feu sacrificiel : des moineaux, des sauterelles et des poissons. Le cinquième élément de ce pañcabali est composé de la tête, du cœur et des poumons d'un des buffles qui ont été égorgés la nuit précédente dans le temple de la déesse.

L'immolation des buffles est un événement social auquel participent plusieurs castes. Au contraire, le sacrifice au feu du lendemain est exécuté par un seul yajamāna (sacrifiant) assisté par un spécialiste rituel, le karmācārya. Le yajamāna porte le titre de juju (roi) et prétend descendre des rois qui ont autrefois régné au nord de Kathmandu.

*Ce « sacrifice de serpents » (sarpabali ou sarpāhuti), bien qu'incluant d'autres animaux, n'est pas tout à fait sans précédent dans la tradition indienne. Il suffit de rappeler le sacrifice de serpents conduit par le roi Janamejaya et aussi l'incendie de la forêt Khāṇḍava dans l'*Adiparvan* du *Mahābhārata*. En outre, selon certains textes rituels, les serpents peuvent eux-mêmes être les sacrifiants. Le sarpabali, à Kathmandu, révèle ces deux aspects simultanément et pourrait donc être considéré comme un sacrifice de soi-même aussi bien que cosmique.*

Enfin, ce sacrifice au feu s'oppose au sacrifice sanglant dédié à Indrāyanī, la nuit précédente. Tandis que le buffle immolé est redistribué aux participants sous forme de parts prescrites, selon leur position sociale, le reste du sarpabali, ne consiste qu'en cendres, qui, si elles ont un pouvoir exceptionnel, ne confèrent aucune marque distinctive à ceux qui les reçoivent.